

Frequently Asked Questions About Trapping or Hunting Bears With Bait and Hounds



Why are Maine Game Wardens and Biologists opposed to Question 1?

Maine Game Wardens and Biologists are opposed to this referendum because it will eliminate the most effective methods we have to control Maine's large bear population. If the referendum passes, we expect Maine's bear population to rise, putting a greater burden on local police and public safety officers to respond to bears in communities. After bears become more common where there are more people, it will be almost impossible to reduce bear numbers in these residential areas since many town ordinances prohibit the discharge of firearms.

How many bears are in Maine?

Maine has the largest black bear population in the eastern United States and it is increasing, estimated at more than 30,000. Bears are found nearly statewide, but are less common in southern and coastal sections of the state, where there are more people.

Why is Maine's bear population increasing?

Maine's bear population is increasing in response to improved habitat that has increased both the abundance and the diversity of bear foods. Following the spruce budworm outbreak that reduced the amount of mature spruce/fir forest in Maine, there has been an increase in nut and berry crops. In addition, since 2005 Maine's bear harvest has declined. Both improved habitat conditions and reduced hunter harvest have allowed Maine's bear population to increase from 23,000 bears in 2000 to more than 30,000 bears in 2010. We expect that if this referendum passes, hunter harvest will decline precipitously, and the bear population will grow even faster.

Can't Maine's bear population control its own numbers? Why do we need to hunt them?

If bears were not hunted in Maine, the population would grow and expand until bear numbers were limited by the amount of food the habitat can produce. If this were to occur, many more bears would die of starvation and disease, and more bears would be killed to prevent conflicts with people. Public safety concerns and property damage by bears would increase dramatically. Bears would become common in populated areas, and residents in these areas would have to take significant steps to prevent conflicts. Instead of being a highly revered animal that is symbolic of Maine's outdoor heritage, bears would be viewed as a "nuisance" by many residents of Maine.

Until recently, bears could not be hunted in New Jersey, which allowed the bear population to grow. As a result, more than 2,000 conflicts between bears and people were reported each year, with bears entering an average of 100 homes in search of food. New Jersey spends more than 1 million dollars annually to provide information to residents on how to reduce conflicts with black bears. Since 2010, when New Jersey reinstituted its bear hunt, the number of conflicts has declined by nearly 50%.

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Why does Maine allow black bears to be hunted?

Black bears are a long-lived species (up to 30 years of age) and have very few natural predators. Therefore, hunting is an effective and important tool for controlling bear numbers. Maine has the largest black bear population in the east with over 30,000 bears in the state. Without bear hunting in Maine, more bears would be hit by vehicles on Maine roads, more bears would die of starvation or be killed by other bears, and more people would experience problems with bears in their backyards. For example, in Florida where black bears are not hunted, conflicts between bears and people are escalating with around 4,000 complaints each year. By comparison, there is an average of just under 500 complaints in Maine each year, even though we have about 10 times more bears than Florida.

Why does Maine allow black bears to be trapped or hunted with bait or dogs?

Maine is the most heavily forested state in the nation (82% of the state is forest when you include lakes and other water bodies as non-forested) and our forests have a dense understory. This lack of wide open areas combined with northern Maine's dense forest understory makes it difficult to hunt black bears by spotting, stalking, or hunting from a tree stand or blind. Although hunters can still-hunt bears during the entire 14-week fall season (i.e., hunting from a blind or stand, by spotting or stalking, or incidental to deer hunting), less than 300 bears are harvested without the use of bait, dogs, or traps. To control Maine's large black bear population, reduce conflicts between bears and people, and ensure a healthy bear population, between 3,500 and 4,500 black bears need to be harvested by trappers and hunters each year. Without traps, dogs, or bait, we will not be able to meet the harvest level needed to keep Maine's bear population in check.

How many bears are harvested each year in Maine?

From 1999-2005, an average of 3,800 bears were harvested each year. Since 2005, Maine's bear harvest has declined to approximately 2,900 each year. Most of these bears (93%) are harvested with the use of bait, dogs, or traps. All of our current methods of hunting bears are needed to meet Maine's harvest objectives to control Maine's large bear population.

What are the bear hunting seasons in Maine?

Maine has a 14-week fall bear season that opens the last Monday in August and closes the last Saturday in November. Bears can be hunted by still-hunters (blinds, stands, or spot and stalk) during the entire season, with bait during the first 4 weeks of the season, with dogs for 7-8 weeks (mid-September to late October), and with traps for 9 weeks (September 1st – October 31st).

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How many people hunt or trap bears in Maine?

Approximately 11,000 hunters and trappers purchase a bear permit each year in Maine. In addition, the nearly 175,000 resident hunters can harvest a bear while deer hunting. Less than 200 bears are taken by deer hunters each fall.

How many other states allow black bears to be trapped or hunted with bait or dogs?

Hunters are permitted to hunt bears with dogs, bait, or traps in 23 of 32 States (72%) and 9 of 11 Canadian Provinces (82%) where hunting of black bears is allowed. In addition, wildlife biologists throughout North America use bait, traps, and dogs to capture bears for research and to resolve conflicts between bears and people. These methods are approved by Animal Care Committees for use by wildlife researchers and managers across the country. In some states that prohibit the use of bait, dogs, or traps for hunting (often by referendum), these methods may still be used by private landowners to resolve bear conflicts. In some cases, hundreds of nuisance bears are killed using these methods each year, even though they can't be used for hunting.

For example, in Oregon where it is prohibited by referendum to hunt bears with bait or dogs, over the last 3 years more than 1,100 bears were killed when causing damage to property or for human safety. By comparison, approximately 12 bears are killed each year in Maine to protect property or human safety.

Does baiting give hunters an unfair advantage?

Maine's thick forest makes it difficult to hunt bears. In fact, only 1 in 4 hunters that use bait to hunt black bears in Maine are successful, which is a lower success rate than hunts for many other wildlife species.

Does hunting black bears with dogs provide an unfair advantage?

Approximately 1 in 3 hunters successfully tree a bear with dogs and only 1 in 4 hunters harvest a treed bear. Pursuing bears with dogs allows the hunter to evaluate the bear to determine whether they want to harvest it or not. Hunting with hounds also allows a close, ethical shot opportunity that reduces the chance that the bear will be wounded and escape.

Why do hunters equip their dogs with radio collars?

Hunter's equip their dogs with radio collars so they can locate their dogs and return them safely home.

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What are the benefits of hunting bears with bait or dogs?

Hunting over bait or with dogs allows hunters to get closer to bears, allowing them to avoid shooting bears with cubs and allowing better shot placement. In Maine, most bears are harvested using one of these techniques and very few bears are wounded by hunters. Some bear managers and experienced hunting outfitters suggest that in areas with dense forests like Maine, hunters should be *required* to use bait or dogs because these methods allow more ethical shooting opportunities, reduce the chance of orphaning cubs, and reduce the number of bears that are wounded and escape.

Why does Maine allow bear trapping?

Bear traps are allowed in many states across the country for research, and to remove problem bears. Maine allows traps to be used to harvest bears because we have a large bear population and very dense forests that makes bear hunting extremely difficult. We need all of our current methods (bait, dogs, traps, and still-hunting) to meet our harvest objectives and keep Maine's bear population in check. In order to trap bears in Maine, you must hold a valid Maine trapping license that is issued after completing a MDIFW trapping course.

Are bear traps cruel?

The only traps that can be used for bears in Maine are cage-style traps and cable foot restraints. Both of these traps are used by wildlife researchers across the country to capture and release bears unharmed. The use of these traps has been reviewed by Animal Care Committees across the country and they are considered to be safe, humane devices.

Does bait lead to more bears?

No, natural foods influence the number of bears in Maine, not bait. Bears feed around the clock during late summer and fall as they attempt to gain enough weight for hibernation, and can consume up to 27,000 calories/day. The total amount of bait that is placed in the woods each fall is only a small fraction of the food that bears need to survive and reproduce. Research on baiting in other parts of North America has concluded that it does not have a significant impact on bear populations. Maine's 40 years of monitoring radiocollared black bears shows that in years of poor natural foods, yearling bears are lighter and fewer cubs survive, despite the presence of bait. Maine bears produce fewer cubs and weigh less than bears that live in areas where a large amount of human foods are available to bears throughout the year. In these places, bears give birth to cubs as early as 2 years of age, with litters of up to 5 cubs, and adult males can weigh over 800 pounds. In Maine, bears normally produce their first litter of cubs between 4 and 6 years of age and average between 2 and 3 cubs per litter. Most adult males weigh between 200 and 300 pounds. In fact, without the use of bait, Maine's bear population would grow even quicker since fewer bears would be harvested each year.

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Does bait habituate bears to human food sources?

No, bears are locational learners. For example, if a bear finds bird seed in a backyard, they will search other backyards for food. Bait in Maine must be at least ¼ mile from a dwelling, and most baits are placed deep in the woods. Since bears search areas where they have found food in the past, bears will search the woods and not backyards for bait. In addition, hunters use cover scent and camouflage to prevent bears from detecting their presence. Thus, hunting with bait does not habituate bears to human sources of food or people. Food in backyards can habituate bears to people especially if attractants are not removed, since the presence of people or noises and scent associated with people are prevalent. That is why bear managers across the country discourage feeding black bears (even inadvertently feeding bears (i.e., bird seed and garbage cans)), but permits the use of bait.

Does baiting lead to more conflicts with people?

No, food in backyards (e.g., bird feeders, garbage cans, grills, pet foods) leads to more conflicts with bears and people. Baiting can reduce the number of conflicts by luring bears into the woods and away from homes and campgrounds. Hunting with bait also tends to remove the most bold and aggressive bears from the population, since these animals are more likely to visit a bait site during daylight hours and be harvested by a hunter. In fact, states that do not allow bears to be hunted with bait experience more conflicts than Maine.

The number of human/bear conflicts in Maine is lower than eastern states that do not allow bears to be hunted with bait (2013 Eastern Black Bear Workshop Jurisdictional Survey Results).

State	Hunt bears with bait	# Conflicts ¹	#People ³ (million)	# Bears	# Bear Conflicts/ 1,000 bears
Maine	Yes	466	1.3	>31,000	15
Massachusetts	No	125 ²	6.5	4,250	29
Virginia	No	520	8.0	17,000	31
North Carolina	No	559	9.5	17,250	32
Vermont	No	500	0.6	6,570	76
Pennsylvania	No	1,700	12.7	18,000	94
West Virginia	No	1,050	1.8	11,000	95
New York	No	760	19.4	6,500	116
Maryland	No	325	5.8	1,000	325

¹Number of conflicts is reported as the average number of conflicts in the past 5 years (2008-12).

²Does not include conflicts received by municipalities.

³Source: United States 2010 Census

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What is happening in states that passed similar referenda making it illegal to hunt bears with bait, dogs or traps?

From 1993-1996, the states of Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and Massachusetts passed referendums to ban the use of bait and hounds by bear hunters (referendums to ban these methods were rejected by voters in Michigan and Idaho and Maine (2004)). These states are all very different from Maine and we expect the impact of a referendum to be much greater here. All four states have much less forest cover than Maine. This more open habitat makes it easier to spot bears while hunting. In addition, the use of bait and hounds were responsible for a relatively small percentage of the harvest (less than 45%) in these states. As a result, they were able to partially mitigate the decline in bear harvest that was expected after the referendum by lengthening the bear hunting season(s), increasing the bear bag limit, issuing more bear hunting licenses, or reducing the cost of a bear license. Some states also have a spring bear hunting season, which is prohibited in Maine.

Even with these efforts, the harvest in all of these states is less than half the number that needs to be removed to control Maine's large bear population. Maine is the most forested state in the country and its dense understory makes it difficult to spot bears, therefore the overwhelming majority of our bear harvest (over 90%) is taken by hunters using bait, hounds or traps. Unlike other states, Maine would have very few options to increase the bear harvest if the referendum passes because we already have a long bear season and issue bear permits in unlimited numbers.

In other states, conflicts between people and bears are generally more common and more severe. In Oregon and Colorado, an average of more than 350 bears are killed each year in response to conflicts. One Colorado County has banned levered door handles on new houses because home entries by bears are so common. In some Colorado towns, bear complaints are the #1 call received by police departments. In Oregon and Washington, bears cause an estimated \$16 million in damage annually to the timber industry, by stripping and eating the inner bark. Timber companies supplementally feed bears in order to reduce damage. In Oregon, landowners can kill bears with bait or hounds in unlimited numbers, without a permit, in order to prevent property damage. In Massachusetts, bear conflicts have doubled since the referendum passed.

Currently in Maine, bear conflicts are relatively uncommon and are not severe. Home entries by bears are extremely rare. Each year, fewer than 12 bears are killed in response to conflicts. Extensive property damage by bears is infrequent. If the referendum passes, landowners would not be permitted to use bait, hounds, or traps to deal with problem bears and we expect conflicts to rise as they have elsewhere.

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What can MDIFW do to increase hunter harvest without bait, dogs, or traps if this referendum passes?

Referenda in several states have prohibited the use of bait or dogs to hunt black bears. Bear managers from these states have increased hunting opportunity by increasing the length of the season, allowing hunters to harvest 2 or more bears each year, allowing a spring hunt, and/or reducing license fees. However, hunters in these states still harvest less than 1,700 bears each year because hunter success **without** bait and dogs is very low (<10%).

Currently, hunters in Maine can harvest up to 2 bears each fall and bears have the longest hunting season of any big game species (late August to end of November). There is no limit to the number of bear licenses that can be sold, and a spring bear hunting season is prohibited by current legislation. Thus, the ability to increase bear hunting opportunity in Maine is very limited. If this referendum passes, we expect the bear harvest will be well below objectives, causing the population to grow rapidly. As a result, conflicts between bears and people and the severity of those conflicts will increase. Maine game wardens, biologists, and local police will spend more time responding to conflicts between bears and people with increased concerns for public safety.

Does MDIFW have the ability to limit bear hunting, if Maine's bear population declines?

Yes, the Commissioner of MDIFW has the authority to reduce Maine's fall bear hunting season, if the bear population declines. In fact, in 1989 when Maine's bear population declined from 21,000 bears to 18,000 bears, the Commissioner shortened the bait, dog, trap, and still-hunting seasons. By 1997, the bear population recovered and the Commissioner lengthened the fall bear hunting seasons.

What will happen if this referendum passes and it is no longer legal in Maine to trap or hunt bears with bait or dogs?

Without the most effective methods to control Maine's large black bear population, Maine's bear population will grow rapidly and expand into southern and coastal areas. We expect more bears will be struck by vehicles, the severity and number of bear conflicts between bears and people will increase, and more bears will die of starvation or disease. In fact, in states that lost hunting with the use of baits and dogs by referendum, the number of conflicts between black bears and people are increasing and more bears are killed in backyards and on roads each year (in Colorado, 410 bears were killed to protect property or public safety and 78 were struck by vehicles in one year alone).